Frederic Bigelow—zealous guardian of Newark's buildings

NA alumnus supervised city's growth in early 20th century

By Stanley B. Winters

If one of the hallmarks of a great city is its ability to attract dedicated civil servants, then Newark merited that ranking when Frederic Bigelow was its Superintendent of Buildings.

For almost 30 years Bigelow was responsible for the structural integrity of Newark's buildings, elimination of their fire hazards, removal of antiquated structures, and approval of plans for new or additional buildings. His career spanned the crest of the city's physical growth in the 1920s, its stagnation during the 1930s, and the stirrings of revival in the 1940s.

Fred Bigelow was a lively, self-assured man whose attitude toward those who disagreed with him—and sometimes they were many—could be contentious and condescending as well as gracious. Zealous in carrying out his official duties, he occasionally stretched his authority to the distress of politicians and his associates at City Hall. But none questioned his ability or integrity.

Bigelow was born in Newark on February 17, 1882. His father, Moses Bigelow, ran the family paint and varnish business, while his mother came from an old Sussex County family whose ancestors included Dr. Samuel Fowler, discoverer of zinc in that area and a member of Congress. His paternal grandfather, Moses Bigelow, was a paint manufacturer who served as Newark's mayor from 1857 to 1864 and welcomed Abraham Lincoln to Newark shortly after his election as President. The Bigelow family, located in New Jersey since 1715, had roots earlier in Connecticut.

Young Bigelow attended Newark Academy (1892-97), Newark High School, and the Newark Technical School (later Newark College of Engineering, now NJIT). Possessing a talent for architecture and design, he studied for three years at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

When Newark formed a city planning commission in 1911, Bigelow was named a member and its secretary. He helped to hire the engineering consultants who drafted the city's first master plan. Later he served on the Board of Police Commissioners, as his father had done in the 1890s. (His mayor-grandfather had appointed Newark's first police chief.)

One month after the U.S. entered the war against Germany in April 1917, Bigelow enlisted in the Army. He served in the cavalry and field artillery and rose to the rank of captain.

Public service attracted him as it did other sons of the business elite. A lifelong Democrat, he was persuaded to enter politics by James R. Nugent, longtime Democratic leader in Newark and Essex County and a power behind several mayoral thrones. He ran for local offices in 1919 and 1921 but lost each time despite creditable showings. In April 1922 he was appointed Superintendent of Buildings.

One cannot claim for Fred Bigelow the sort of broad, metropolitan vision held by his noted contemporary, Mayor Thomas L. Raymond, NA Class of 1895 (see *The Newark Academy Alumnus,* Spring 1983, pp. 8-9); but he exhibited a similar fierce civic pride and patrician yet practical approach to urban problems. Initially, he supervised a construction boom

OLD CITY HOSPITAL in Newark, above, was one of the buildings declared unworthy of major repairs by Frederic Bigelow, Superintendent of Buildings, in the 1930s. Eventually it was replaced.

that by 1926 had lifted Newark to tenth place among the nation's cities. From 1922 through 1927 his office issued 32,435 permits for $245,390,000 in work, with $52,600,000 coming in 1927 alone. (Lest you think this not much, remember that in 1927 carpenters got .75 cents an hour and a two-car garage cost $350 to build!)

The boom did not last much longer. With the onset of the Great Depression construction in Newark virtually halted. It revived only in the 1940s with the building of low-income housing and the renovation of factories for war production. Notwithstanding the state of the economy, Bigelow persevered in striving to reach his goals.

One goal was to eliminate illegal and hazardous conditions in Newark's 45,000 residential and 7,300 industrial structures. This proved impossible with a staff of fewer than two dozen, but he kept the heat on violators through inspections, court orders, publicity, and direct action. He once sent workmen to demolish a garage with a dwelling above it for which no permit had been issued and which had been declared a fire hazard. He was sued by the owner for malicious prosecution but the court dismissed the case. He simultaneously closed 10 private hospitals and two nursing homes for lack of sprinklers and safety devices.

In 1933, faced with a drastic budget cut for the second year in a row, he warned that the public would "no longer feel safe" in

public places or be forewarned "when one of the hundred or more buildings which are known to be unsafe will drop in the streets."

In the mid-1930s he mounted a drive against hazardous buildings. One major target was the old City Hospital, which he declared unworthy of major repairs because of decrepitude. The hospital was eventually replaced.

Bigelow derided inconsistency and incompetency in agencies staffed with political appointees by the elected City Commission that governed Newark. He often disregarded his nominal superior, the Commissioner of Buildings, usually a patronage appointee, and went straight with his problem to one of the city commissioners. He feuded with the Board of Adjustment over zoning matters, calling them "a group of busybodies" who neglected to uphold the zoning ordinance, and he occasionally issued construction permits that properly should first have gone to the board. Yet he was a strong advocate of upgrading and modernizing Newark's pioneer 1920 zoning code. He offered to do the job himself for a fee of $1,000 but the City Commission chose to hire an outside consultant for $14,000 who prepared the revised ordinance of 1930. Bigelow's reforming campaigns had the backing of the powerful *Newark Evening News,* which praised his "plain speaking and clear understanding."

Bigelow fought steadily for a long-range approach to the problem of guiding Newark's future growth. Seeing that zoning controls alone could not shape a desirable city physically, he and Newark's Chief Engineer Costello in December 1941 proposed creation of a city planning body to replace the original one abolished in 1917.

Subsequently, in 1943 a Central Planning Board was appointed by the City Commission and authorized to make a technical survey preparatory to reversing the city's decline. Bigelow was named one of the board's nine members. He volunteered to assemble a team of expert municipal employees to conduct the survey for minimal cost. His perspective does not seem to have been adequate to the task, however, for previously he had stated that, "A little common-sense economy and some simple planning will stop real disaster." The planning board engaged the well-known firm of Harland Bartholomew and Associates of St. Louis to draft the comprehensive master plan of 1947.

Bigelow had a final fling at politics in 1942, when he ran for Congress in the 11th District against incumbent Republican Fred Hartley. He said he was motivated to run by a desire to help the war effort as a patriotic spokesman in Washington. Unfortunately, it was not a Democratic year. He polled 31,348 votes to Hartley's 37,018, but he had the satisfaction of carrying Hartley's hometown of Kearny and of losing by the smallest margin of any of the other local congressional candidates.

Fred Bigelow was a worthy member of a notable Newark family. (His brother, John O., one year his junior and also a Newark Academy student, 1893-97, was an Essex County Prosecutor, counsel to the Public Utilities Commission, and a judge in the Appellate Division of Superior Court.) He was a skilled woodcarver, a furniture designer, and an architect. His drawings appeared on the covers of *Architectural Record.*

A lifelong bachelor, he died in his Newark home on Mt. Prospect Avenue on March 2, 1952. While the zeal he showed for his job and for his native city was not unique among career Newark civil servants of that era, it certainly was outstanding.

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